

"The Goodness of Forgiveness"

Last week we looked at our theme verse for this series from **1 Peter 3**. It's appealing in what it offers, this experience of loving life and seeing good days, but it is so challenging in the path it lays out for us. We summed it up last week in two points. 1. We must repay evil with blessing. 2. We must rely on God for everything. So this week, I want to come back and look more carefully at this idea of repaying evil with blessing. What does that mean? Does it mean we can not address evil as evil? No. But it means we can not respond to evil *with* evil. And it really means we need to practice the goodness of forgiveness.

I often get questions about forgiveness. They come in several forms. *"How much are we supposed to forgive?" "What does it really mean to forgive others?"* "One person asked: *"In light of my responsibility to forgive, how then do I move on and try to trust again?"*

Most of us have many occasions in which we will have to wrestle with forgiving someone who we feel has sinned against us in some way. *Some people hurt us deliberately, some people accidentally.* Whether accidental or on purpose, it still hurts. Whether I run over your head on purpose or accidentally back over your head because I wasn't paying attention -- it still hurts. *Some people hurt you compulsively.* A lot of people don't set out to hurt husbands, wives, friends or family member but by not controlling their compulsions they cause painful wounds. *Sometimes people hurt us because someone hurt them, and the hurt spills over on us. Some people hurt us, not through a single sinful event, but through a pattern of behavior that continually costs us. Sometimes people hurt us when they are trying to help us.*

Some hurts can just be overlooked. Sometimes we suffer everyday annoyances, things that disappoint us, and we simply need to accept that and offer grace and kindness. But sometimes, the hurts go deeper, and forgiveness isn't easy. If there is anyone who understands this, it is Jesus Christ. Everything he ever suffered at the hands of both friends and enemies was unfairly suffered. And yet, on the cross, he said: *"Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."* What we are going to see in Scripture today is this: ***If you've received the gift of forgiveness through the grace of Jesus, you are called to offer the goodness of forgiveness for the sake of Jesus.***
This is no small thing....

I. JESUS TELLS US TO PRACTICE THE GOODNESS OF EXTRAVAGANT FORGIVENESS.

In **Luke 17:3-4**, Jesus says: *Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, 4 and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him*". It is interesting that sometimes people use this very passage to make forgiveness less radical and more manageable. They focus on the fact that Jesus says: "if he repents, forgive him." They suggest this means we only have to forgive people *if* they repent.

But there are a couple of problems with that approach.

1. For one thing, when Jesus gives this teaching, the disciples don't think forgiveness is being made easier for them. They don't say: "Oh, I see. If I don't think a person has really repented, then I don't have to forgive them" That's not the point. Look at **verse 4**. How sincere would you judge someone's repentance to be if they literally sinned the same sin against you seven times in one day and then after each one came up and just said the words: "I repent." What Jesus is actually describing is a perpetual offender who gives a superficial apology and demonstrates little evidence of lasting change. Look at **verse 5**. The disciples are startled and say, "*Increase our faith*" because they realize Jesus says, "*no matter what happens, or how many times it happens, you are called to forgive.*"

2. The second problem with any attempt to make forgiveness conditional is that there are other places where Jesus clearly tells us to forgive without any conditions. For instance, in **Mark 11:25**, Jesus says: "*And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.*" Here Jesus pictures you in prayer, and you realize that you are holding something against someone. Jesus doesn't tell you to wait until you can go rebuke them and then wait and see *if* they repent. He says, forgive them right then and there as you pray whether they repent or not. Forgive them.

This is not about what the legal system should do but what you should do in your heart. This isn't talking about restoring a person to a place of trust necessarily, either. There is a difference between forgiving someone in your heart and restoring that person to a place of trust.

3. Sometimes restoration and reconciliation are conditional, but true forgiveness in your heart is not conditional.

John Ortberg makes a helpful distinction. He writes:

People sometimes think that forgiving someone means we must reunite with them no matter what -- that a wife must move back in with a brute who beats her or a businessman must take back a dishonest partner as many times as requested.... forgiveness and reconciliation are two separate things. Forgiveness takes place within the heart of one human being. It can be granted even if the other person does not ask for it or deserve it... Reconciliation requires the rebuilding of trust, and that means good faith on the part of both parties.¹

It makes sense that forgiveness takes wisdom and, like all love, has to be offered at different levels depending on the situation. A wife can forgive an abusive husband but wisely refuse to invite him back into the home. A Christian can forgive a racist and yet still protest that injustice and go to court to seek a remedy. There can be forgiveness without reconciliation and acceptance of an unhealthy situation. If we don't recognize that we will severely limit the people we can forgive. Or, we will be led into premature reconciliation with people who are not ready for it. We will do them no favors with that approach. Whether complete reconciliation is possible or wise, you are to forgive others from the heart as a follower of Christ.

So we have to ask, what then does it mean to forgive? The answer is...

II. THE GOODNESS OF FORGIVENESS LIES IN CHOOSING TO LET GO OF THE THINGS WE COULD HOLD AGAINST PEOPLE.

When Jesus talks about forgiveness in **Luke 17:3-5**, The Greek word translated as *forgive* means to "release" or "let go" of something. In Classical Greek, it was used of letting go of an arrow or untying a ship to set sail. It's also using of letting go of a debt. In **Mark 11:25**, Jesus gestures toward this imagery of releasing or letting go. He says, *And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.*" To be forgiving is to be continually letting go of the things we hold on to and hold against people.

A. One of the most common ways we respond to someone who has hurt us is to feel and *hold onto* the feeling that they owe us.

That's why in the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." What happens when we feel someone owes us?

1. Sometimes, we try to make the person pay for what they have done very directly. We may demand an apology. We might say or do things that are hurtful to make them pay for what they've done.

2. Sometimes, we try to make the person pay for what they have done indirectly. You can just withdraw from them. Or speak about them instead of speaking to them. The ugly truth is sometimes we just wait and hope they suffer.

One time, I felt I had forgiven someone something they had done. But then I heard they got caught doing caught doing it again and I discovered, I didn't just feel that it was good that justice was done. I felt something less clean, a kind selfish pleasure in their suffering. And I realized my forgiveness wasn't as deep as I thought, and I had to reexamine my forgiveness and repent of my sins.

B. What Jesus says is, “Don't try to make them pay before you feel kindness toward them, just let go of the debt.

Let's be clear about what forgiveness is not and what it is.

1. *Forgiveness is not literally forgetting.* Forgetting in the sense that most people mean it is a *passive* process in which something that happened fades from memory. Forgiving is an *active* process that involves a conscious choice. When the Bible says, God remembers our sins no more (Isaiah 43:25). It doesn't mean God can't bring them to mind but that he deliberately lets them go. He chooses not to use them against us, to insist on payment, or allow them to keep us from him.

2. *Forgiveness is not excusing.* It is not pretending that it wasn't a big deal or it didn't hurt. One of the great forgiveness stories in the Bible is the story of Joseph, whose brothers beat him and sold him into slavery, and then later in life, he forgives them. He doesn't excuse them. He tells them, *You meant it for evil, you intended to harm me... but God used it for good.* And then he forgave them (Genesis 50). The only way to let go of the hurt and the sense of debt is to willingly choose to bear the unfairness through the goodness of forgiveness.

3. *Forgiveness is a decision to let go of what you have been holding against the person who hurt you.* Forgiveness is not a feeling. It is a decision - a series of decisions to let go of what you could hold against that person. You choose to bear the cost of the pain they

caused you - to let go of the debt. It doesn't necessarily mean that you can trust that person. Trust is earned, but forgiveness is just given.

4. *Forgiveness is a set of practices.* It's not a feeling. Forgiveness is often practiced before it is felt and not felt before it is practiced.

Prayer is part of it. Listen to Jesus in **Luke 6:27-28**, "*But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*" This has been one of the most practical practices for me. It is the power of replacement or displacement. When you find yourself mulling over an offense done to you, don't just try hard not to think about your anger. Counter those unforgiving feelings with intentional prayers for blessing. Sure you pray that that person will learn and change and grow but those things are blessings and you pray for blessing and trust God.

Doing good for others, is another part of the practice of forgiveness. Sometimes we only begin to feel loving when we do good. I heard a man tell how his wife had really hurt him. She didn't even know it - but he was mad. Then, she asked him to go to the grocery store for her, something that he hated doing anyway. But he went and was grudgingly pushing his cart down the aisle when he saw some specialty coffee that he knew was a favorite of hers. He thought to himself, "*If she hadn't been so unkind to me today, I would have surprised her with this.*" But then he said, "Even as I thought these words, another part of me wanted to get her the coffee. He wrestled with his feelings and then picked up coffee, and he said, the moment he did, his anger began to melt away. Sometimes it works just like that. You make a decision. You act on that decision, and then your feelings change. It's like you are no longer putting fuel on the fire of your anger. In fact, you are pouring water on it, the goodness of grace, and sooner or later, the anger subsides, and the forgiveness deepens.

C. There is a beautiful goodness to forgiveness, but it isn't easy.

There are a number of reasons we resist the goodness of forgiveness. One is just our sinful, self-centered nature. But there is another factor that is very active in the world today. Sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning have written extensively about victim or victimhood culture in today's world. According to them, one thing that is highly valued and continually demanded in today's culture is the affirmation of your personal identity. Any offense against your identity or against you personally makes you a victim. This is where it gets complicated but interesting. In much of today's culture, the more you are a victim and

hold on to victimhood status, the more support, attention, and honor even you deserve. While the greatest honor is reserved for the victim. The second place of honor goes to those who can claim the role of the supporters or defenders of the victim. So forgiveness, letting go of an offense, which has always been hard, is now especially counter-cultural. It is letting go not only of the hurt that has been done to you but to the honor and attention and even power you might claim if you hold on to victimhood. To let go of an offense is to not only bear the pain without payback but to relinquish the power of holding on to it. ²

Ultimately,

D. The goodness of forgiveness consists in letting go of what others have done *because* God has let go of what you have done.

The most powerful part of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness is the fact that he is the one teaching us about forgiveness! Do you believe that Jesus is your Savior, your redeemer? If so, then you believe that your sins are many and ugly, but they have all been forgiven by God through Jesus. You have sinned against God all your life. Instead of loving and obeying God, you have rebelled against him, been ungrateful to him, and broken his laws in countless ways. And yet he has looked at you and said: "*You don't owe me anything.*" I let it go. I pay your debt for you. Jesus went to the cross and said, "*Father, forgive them; they don't know what they do.*" Then just before he died, he said: "*It is finished.*" Do you know what was finished? Your debt for your sins. You don't earn that. You cannot. You simply receive it. If you have received it. Then give it to others.

Ephesians 4:31-32 says, *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.* If you are "*in Christ,*" as **verse 32** says, which means you have put your faith in Him as your Savior, How does God forgive you? Completely. He has put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and is kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving toward you. When that takes root in your heart, you are empowered to forgive others. *Christians believe they are the most forgiven people in the world, and therefore we should be the most forgiving people in the world.*

In a recent online article, Tim Keller writes: "*You can only stay bitter toward someone if you feel superior. If you feel you would never do anything like what they did. Those who won't forgive show they have*

not accepted the fact of their own sinfulness."³The broken body and shed blood of Jesus means we are all in need of forgiveness.

CONCLUSION

Before we conclude, I want us to go back to the Scripture with which we started. In **Luke 17:3-5**, Notice how Jesus begins: "*Pay attention to yourselves.*" When someone hurts us in some way, we often focus on them and what they did. Jesus says, when someone hurts you, that's when you need to *pay attention to yourself*. *Pay attention to* how you respond, be careful. That's not how we normally think, but Jesus says it's how we need to think. In part because bitterness, resentment, an unforgiving heart is poison. *Pay attention to yourself*. It will corrode your spiritual life. *Pay attention to yourself*. It is deceptive. You may think you are doing better than you are.

We need the goodness of forgiveness. We can't be strong individually without the goodness of forgiveness. We can't have marriages that last for decades if we don't forgive. We can't be a strong church if we don't forgive. ***If you've received the gift of forgiveness through the grace of Jesus, you are called to offer the goodness of forgiveness for the sake of Jesus.*** On the cross, Jesus said: "it is finished." He rose again to be Lord and Savior, for everyone turns *to* and trusts *in* him. If your trust is in Him, you can survive and even thrive in spite of the hurts, and snubs and slights, and even the serious sins of others because through faith in Christ, you have His love and grace and presence and promise. *You can forgive because of Christ.*

Amen

A Prayer for Receiving Christ

Almighty God, Thank you for revealing in Jesus that your willingness to forgive outpaces and overwhelms all of our deepest and darkest sins. I confess my need for your saving grace because I confess my many sins and my sinful heart.

I turn to Christ, the gracious savior who offers me the goodness of complete forgiveness, I believe he died on the cross to pay for my sins and rose again as Lord and Savior. I receive and rest on him alone for my salvation. Grant me the eternal life promised to all who come to him in faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Lord Jesus, My desire is to love life and see good days! Forgive the hypocrisy that wants to revel in your forgiveness for me while resisting your command to forgive others. Help me, by your Holy Spirit, to gladly turn from bitterness and resentment to offer the goodness of Christ-like forgiveness to all who sin against me. Let me always live in the knowledge that your eyes are on me and your ears hear my prayers. I ask in the name of my Savior, Jesus, Amen.

A Prayer for People who need Christ.

I pray not only for myself and the church but also for others who also need Christ. Please send your Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of the people you have placed in my life, to draw them to Jesus and make them kingdom laborers. I ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

¹ John Ortberg, *Everybody's Is Normal Till You Get To Know Them*, John Ortberg. P. 158

² Quoted by Tim Keller in <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/the-fading-of-forgiveness/>

³ See: <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/the-fading-of-forgiveness/>